

# Planning a funeral

Statistics show that nearly half of all American consumers have never arranged for a funeral. Yet, when a death occurs, consumers are called on to make important and potentially costly decisions under tight time constraints and emotional conditions. Like any other expensive purchase, consumers need information to help them make funeral choices that suit their personal needs.

Funeral home costs alone can cost thousands of dollars, not including cemetery expenses or other miscellaneous items such as burial clothes, additional transportation charges, flowers, clergy honorarium, and newspaper notices. From start to finish, the traditional adult funeral including cemetery expenses can easily cost over \$5,000.

The amount of money involved provides good reason for you to purchase a funeral with great care. Your budget and true desires should guide your choice of arrangements.

## **FTC funeral rule**

Traditionally, funerals have been sold as “packages” with only the casket price listed separately. A Federal Trade Commission (FTC) funeral rule gives consumers a tool to control the cost of funerals. The rule requires funeral directors to provide detailed prepurchase price information to consumers and prohibits certain deceptive acts and practices.

Under the rule, funeral directors are required to provide consumers with itemized price lists in the funeral home before any discussions take place. The list must contain retail price information on caskets, alternative containers, grave liners, vaults, plus other charges for services including embalming, body preparation and use of other services and equipment. In other words, everything you have the option to buy must be broken down individually by price.

Funeral directors must also give consumers itemized price

information over the phone and answer specific pricing questions.

These provisions offer consumers the ability to comparison shop for funerals. Comparison shopping among funeral homes can give you the chance to decide on the kind of funeral that will best meet your emotional and financial needs.

If your choice of funeral homes is limited by location or religious preference, you can still use the rule to your advantage by picking and choosing among the various options within a particular funeral home.

## **Know the price before you sign**

Before signing a contract, consumers must be given a written statement that contains the final prices of all the goods and services selected, including price information on cash advance items such as flowers, newspaper notices, crematory or cemetery prices.

Funeral directors may still offer package prices to those who

don't wish to bother with itemization. If a consumer voluntarily selects a unit package, only the total price need be shown on the statement of goods and services selected.

## **Buying the funeral**

One of the most important things to remember when purchasing a funeral is that the amount of money you spend is no reflection of your feeling for the deceased. Within hours, consumers must make dozens of funeral-related decisions. Given the confusion and emotional circumstances, some people may be swept away by a persuasive sales pitch. You may wish to have an objective friend or member of the clergy accompany you to the funeral home.

The price lists available from funeral homes offer helpful prepurchase price information. Take the time to read them carefully. You may even wish to take them home to discuss options with other family members. What you decide to spend is entirely up to you. The price lists let you know exactly what you're getting for your money.

## **Embalming and visitation**

The FTC funeral rule prohibits funeral directors from representing that embalming is required by law (it's not, except under certain rare circumstances) or that embalming permanently

prevents or significantly delays natural decomposition (it doesn't).

Before embalming, funeral directors must attempt to get permission from the survivors. Unless required by law, you don't have to pay for unauthorized embalming performed unless you select a type of funeral which would require embalming, such as a funeral with viewing. A written disclosure to this effect must be in writing on the final bill.

Visitation costs at the funeral home will vary depending on the individual home and the length of the visitation. As a less expensive alternative, you may wish to check to see if visitation can be held at your church. This has been done in some areas and may save you money.

## **Caskets**

Never lose sight of your budget when choosing a casket. Many different types of caskets are available, from cloth-covered wood models that cost a couple hundred dollars to solid bronze and copper caskets costing several thousand dollars.

Caskets are a high profit item for funeral homes. Don't be influenced by derogatory statements or unflattering displays of lower-priced caskets.

Under the FTC funeral rule, funeral directors must provide

consumers with a complete price list of all available caskets with enough information to identify each casket. The rule also says that funeral directors are prohibited from misrepresenting that any casket will delay natural decomposition.

Although funeral directors may not misrepresent that embalming, caskets, or burial vaults can preserve the body for extended periods of time, they do have the obligation and the right to pass along any information contained in the manufacturer's warranty.

Caskets are not required for direct cremations. If a funeral home arranges for direct cremation, they must make unfinished wood caskets or alternative containers such as cardboard trays available. Some cemeteries have rules prohibiting the use of certain products for cremation. The rule requires that this information be made clear to consumers.

## **Cremation**

Direct cremation is generally the least expensive form of final disposition, costing around \$150-\$280 for incineration. Since state law requires that the remains be held for 48 hours prior to cremation, consumers will usually make arrangements with a funeral home for storage, transportation and the necessary paperwork.

The average cost of these additional services is around \$500.

As mentioned earlier, the law does not require caskets for cremations. An inexpensive cardboard box or alternative container should qualify as the “suitable container” required by most crematories. There are no state laws pertaining to the disposition of ashes. Check with your county coroner or medical examiner regarding local requirements.

## **Cemeteries**

Cemetery costs can easily make up one-third of traditional funeral expenses. Although cemeteries are not covered under the FTC funeral rule, as with funeral homes, you can learn some-thing about various options and prices by comparison shopping.

Cemeteries or memorial parks may be owned by cities, counties, churches, fraternal, or private groups on a profit or not-for-profit basis. Cemeteries include traditional graves with markers and monuments and sometimes have mausoleum space for above-ground interment. Memorial parks or gardens are cemeteries without tombstones, using ground-level memorials or landscaping. They may include crematories, mausoleums, chapels and columbariums.

## **Traditional burial**

Single grave spaces in Wisconsin cemeteries range from around \$200 to over \$700. Prices are generally higher in and near large cities than in outlying areas. Spaces within a cemetery may vary in price depending on their location on the grounds. An allowance for the grave's care fund may be included in the purchase price, or it may be an added fee, depending on the type of cemetery.

Interment (opening and closing of the grave site) can run anywhere from \$150 to \$600. There may be substantial additional charges for late hour, weekend or holiday burials, laying granite or concrete foundations for markers and monuments.

The cost of burying the remains of someone who has been cremated (cremains) starts around \$200 for a ground cremation space. There will likely be additional costs for a permanent container (\$195) and for burying the cremains (\$195).

## **Outer burial containers**

Burial vaults, boxes and grave liners are metal, fiber glass, or cement containers that line the grave and hold the coffin.

Outer burial containers are not required by state or federal law, but most cemeteries require them to prevent the ground

from settling over a grave, making cemetery maintenance easier. Either burial vaults or grave liners serve this purpose. Check with the cemetery you plan to use on its requirements.

Unscrupulous sellers may exploit consumers by selling them expensive vaults, implying they will better prevent decomposition. But no matter how tightly constructed or persuasively sold, vaults cannot prevent inevitable decomposition. The funeral rule prohibits funeral directors from misrepresenting that any vault will delay natural decomposition or protect the body from grave site substances.

## **Markers and monuments**

Grave markers and monuments may be purchased from a cemetery, monument seller or funeral director. Grave markers are flush with the ground and may range from \$400 to over \$1600 for a single marker. Monuments, which rise above the ground, can run anywhere from \$400 to over \$2,000, depending on the style, material and design.

Some cemeteries require that only flush-set markers be used, since upright monuments make grounds maintenance difficult. Other cemeteries may limit the height of upright memorials. Whoever sells you the marker should be aware of your cemetery's regulations, but double-check to see that your

cemetery will accept the type of memorial you choose.

Although cemeteries may set memorial and vault standards, they cannot require the purchasers of plots to purchase these items exclusively from that cemetery. Don't be pressured into buying from any seller until you have compared prices in your locality.

Veterans are eligible for a VA-paid bronze or granite memorial available in several styles. Families of veterans can also receive funds to be used towards the monument of their choice. Contact the Veterans Administration.

## **Mausoleum**

A mausoleum is a building usually made of stone with places for above-ground interment. Double and single mausoleum crypts can cost anywhere from \$1500 to over \$4,000. The cost may or may not include a care fund charge. Mausoleum crypts are usually arranged in levels, and prices vary according to height. There may also be an additional charge for entombment.

## **Columbariums**

A columbarium is a space or niche for the cremains, often within the walls of a mausoleum. The cost ranges from \$400 to over \$1000 without an urn. Urns, which hold the remains,

are sold by funeral directors and cemeteries at varying prices and may be required if the columbarium has a front glass panel instead of metal or marble.

## **Anatomical gifts**

Wisconsin law provides that a person may arrange to donate his or her body to a medical school for scientific, medical or educational purpose. Some restrictions apply and arrangements must be made by the donor in advance. There is no cost for body donation; however, survivors remain responsible for medical costs incurred prior to signing the donation forms and for any funeral or memorial service expenses. Contact the UW Department of Anatomy at 608/262-2888 for more information.

People interested in organ donation are also encouraged to make advance arrangements and to be sure to communicate intentions to survivors. The Anatomical Gift Statement on the back of the Wisconsin driver's license provides one way for you to indicate your wishes. In most instances, traditional funeral and burial services may still occur. For more information about organ donation call 800/472-0111.

## **Ways to reduce the high cost of funerals**

Listed below are several economical options to the traditional funeral, as well as some organizations that pay death benefits. Each may help you reduce the high cost of funeral, cemetery and other related arrangements.

## **Memorial societies**

Over 145 memorial societies throughout the U.S. serve a half-million members with simple and affordable funerals. Usually organized by churches, unions, senior citizen groups, and consumer advocate organizations, memorial societies are all nonprofit and are operated by volunteers.

Membership in one of Wisconsin's memorial societies is open to anyone with a one-time enrollment fee of \$15 for one person, \$25 for a couple. No charge for children under 18.

In addition to cremations or burials provided at low cost, members receive information on durable power of attorney for health, forms for planning all aspects of one's funeral arrangements, details on body and organ donations, and instructions on family burials without the expense of a funeral director. Information about a memorial society in your area can be obtained by contacting:

**Memorial Societies of Wisconsin**  
**6900 Lost Lake Road**  
**Egg Harbor, Wisconsin**  
**54209-9231**  
**920/868-3136**  
**800/458-5563 (toll-free)**

## **Death benefits**

Many death benefits go unclaimed each year because consumers are unaware they are available.

Under certain circumstances, surviving family members can receive money from the Social Security Administration. Check with the Social Security Administration on eligibility and collection requirements.

Fraternal organizations and unions also may provide death benefits to their members' survivors, and railroad employees are covered by certain benefits. If appropriate, contact these groups to apply for death benefits or obtain further information.

The Veterans Administration provides veterans' families with benefits that can significantly reduce the cost of funeral and cemetery expenses. These benefits may include free burial in a national cemetery and a free grave marker. Contact the Veterans Administration toll-free at 1-800/827-0464 for further information.

## **Burial arrangements**

Wisconsin law allows immediate family members of the deceased to care for and bury the deceased. Some requirements pertain. For more information send a check for \$1.00 to cover postage and handling for the "Family Burial Packet," to:

**Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services**  
**Division of Health**  
**P.O. Box 309**  
**Madison, Wisconsin 53701-0309**

## **Preneed plans**

Preneed funeral plans allow you to purchase merchandise or make decisions about the type of funeral service and place of burial you desire. Preplanning is a good idea. But, preneed planning doesn't necessarily mean prepaying. Consumers have lost substantial amounts of money after investing in preneed plans for funeral and burial expenses.

Problems occur with preneed plans when the company that sells the plan goes out of business or when consumers find out, after many years of paying into a plan, that it does not cover all expenses or carries stiff cancellation penalty. People who move to another state often find their plan is valid with only one funeral home in one state, or are left

with a cemetery plot far away from family and friends.

Significant changes in the laws pertaining to preneed sellers of cemetery merchandise went into effect in 1991. Wisconsin now requires most cemetery authorities and preneed sellers to register with the state. Consumers must be given written copies of preneed contracts.

## **Trusts**

Most preneed plans are set up as trust accounts or term life insurance policies. With a **revocable** funeral trust account, you may demand a refund of all funds, with interest and dividends, at any time. With an **irrevocable** funeral trust, the funds on deposit must be used for the funeral arrangements and may not be withdrawn prior to death. Irrevocable trusts may be advantageous to SSI (Supplemental Security Income) and MA (Medical Assistance) recipients, since they allow recipients to shelter some of their money and not have it counted as an asset. Contact your local social services office for details.

Although it may seem the most efficient way to take the burden off your survivors, a trust account may not be the best use of your dollars. Inflation may make the cost of a prearranged funeral greater than your trust balance, even

with accrued interest. Check out other options for investing your money and setting up provisions for its use at the time of death.

However you proceed, be sure to discuss your wishes and any arrangements you've made with survivors. Keep all related papers in a safe, accessible place. It's also good to periodically review your arrangement to make sure they reflect your current situation and preferences.

### **Shop with care**

The high cost of funerals warrants careful shopping. Use the price lists available now from funeral homes to choose exactly the services and merchandise you want.

Be on guard for subtle and exploitative selling tactics. Be sure to have a calm and rational friend or a member of the clergy nearby to help you decide on funeral arrangements you want and can afford.

If you suspect that you have been the victim of unfair or illegal practices in the purchase of a funeral, or related products and services, file a complaint.

For more information, or to file a complaint, contact:

**Department of Regulation & Licensing  
Funeral Directors Examining Board  
1400 East Washington Ave  
P.O. Box 8935**

**Madison, Wisconsin 53708  
608/266-5511**

**Department of Agriculture,  
Trade and Consumer  
Protection  
2811 Agriculture Drive  
P.O. Box 8911  
Madison, Wisconsin 53708-  
8911  
800/422-7128 (toll-free)**

**FAX: (608) 224-4939**

**TTY: (608) 224-5058**

**E-MAIL:  
datcph hotline@datcp.state.wi.us**

**WEBSITE:  
<http://datcp.state.wi.us/>**

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